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El Yunque National Forest

# Record of Decision

*for the Revised Land Management Plan*

Forest Service | Region 8 | El Yunque National Forest | R8-MB 152 C | May 2019

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# Record of Decision

**for the**

**Final Environmental Impact Statement and El Yunque National Forest Revised Land Management Plan**

**Eastern Puerto Rico**

**Municipalities of: Río Grande, Luquillo, Fajardo, Ceiba, Naguabo, Las Piedras, Juncos, Canóvanas and Humacao**


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# List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| CAA | Clean Air Act |
| CIRMA | Community Interface Resource Management Area |
| CWA | Clean Water Act |
| DEIS | Draft Environmental Impact Statement |
| ESA | Endangered Species Act |
| EYNF | El Yunque National Forest |
| FEIS | Final Environmental Impact Statement |
| IITF | International Institute of Tropical Forestry |
| MCF | Thousand cubic feet |
| NEPA | National Environmental Policy Act |
| NF | National Forest |
| NFMA | National Forest Management Act |
| NHPA | National Historic Preservation Act |
| NOAA | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration |
| NOI | Notice of Intent |
| ROD | Record of Decision |
| ROS | Recreation Opportunity Spectrum |
| SCC | Species of Conservation Concern |
| SHPO | State Historic Preservation Office |

# Introduction

This Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving El Yunque National Forest Revised Land Management Plan (hereafter also referred to as the "Revised Land Management Plan" or "Revised Plan"). This decision is based on Alternative 2, as displayed in the Environmental Impact Statement for the Revised Land Management Plan. The decision implements the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219 and the goals of the Department of Agriculture, including facilitating rural prosperity and economic development and fostering productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System Lands.

The area affected by this decision is El Yunque National Forest ("Forest" or "El Yunque"), located within the rugged Sierra de Luquillo Mountains, on the eastern end of Puerto Rico. The Forest contains approximately 29,000 acres and is surrounded by nine municipalities in the region. El Yunque National Forest plays a unique and important role for the local communities and the broader public. El Yunque National Forest is the only tropical forest in the National Forest System. It represents the largest block of undisturbed tropical forest, essentially unchanged by human intervention in Puerto Rico.

The Forest contributes socially and economically to the region; it contributes to human health and well-being, offering unique opportunities for recreation, relaxation, exercise, solitude, stewardship, spirituality, community, and many other socioeconomic and cultural benefits. The Forest produces 20 percent of the island's water (an estimated $25 million in water production per year) and contributes more than $3 million per year in wildlife viewing activities. El Yunque also directly contributes over $3.5 million annually to local economies through employment, expenditures, and payments from revenue sharing and in-lieu of taxes. It is the second most visited destination in Puerto Rico. Its lush and dense tropical vegetation, steep slopes, cascading streams and rivers, diverse wildlife and tree species make El Yunque an outstanding recreation setting for people seeking outdoor pleasure and adventure. The Forest is also considered locally as a way for the people of the Island to connect with their history and culture. Having dual designation as El Yunque National Forest and Luquillo Experimental Forest, it has actively provided researchers a place to advance the knowledge of and associated benefits of tropical forests since the end of the 19$^{th}$ century. Finally, the Forest is important ecologically, providing habitat for over 180 fauna species and 830 native plant species and representing 15 types of vegetation. The yearly water production of El Yunque is estimated at 73.5 billion gallons per year.

## Purpose and Need and Proposed Action

The proposed action is to revise the land management plan for El Yunque National Forest, as required by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA). The NFMA regulations require forest plans to be revised on a 10-15 year cycle or sooner when significant changes in conditions or demands occur in the forest plan area.

The existing Forest Plan is more than 20 years old. Since the Forest Plan was approved in April 1997, there have been changes in the economic, social, and ecological conditions of the Forest, as well as new information based on monitoring and scientific research. Input from local governments, other Federal agencies, and the public, along with science-based evaluations, have helped to further identify areas of the existing Forest Plan that need to be updated. These areas are described in detail in the following section on "Key Plan Revision Topics."

In addition, there are new policies in place since the Forest Plan was approved, including the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219). There is a need to revise the Plan to meet the legal requirements of the

Planning Rule, and the requirements of other relevant policies such as the invasive species Executive Orders.

# Key Plan Revision Topics

From 2013 through 2016, El Yunque National Forest developed the Plan Assessment (USDA Forest Service 2014), the Need for Change (USDA Forest Service 2014, 2015) and the Proposed Management Strategies (USDA Forest Service 2015, 2016). The purpose of these documents was to assess new information, changes in technology, land uses, and to identify what did and did not work well in the 1997 Forest Plan. This information was used to identify several key needs for the Plan revision:

- The need to shift to a more social, economic and ecologically sustainable management when providing multiple-uses.
- A need to promote a stronger regional identity in and around the Forest using an "all-lands" policy.
- The Forest's technical and fiscal capability to maintain facilities, recreation opportunities, scenic value, and ecosystems services.
- A need from the public to access recreation opportunities throughout the Forest while recognizing carrying capacities.
- A need to incorporate collaborative adaptive management at the Plan and site-specific project levels.
- The need to manage at-risk species, including species of conservation concern.
- A need to classify vegetation types and new management requirements for identified functional wetland.
- Impacts of a changing climate on forest multiple uses, specifically forest recreation.

# Coordination with State and Local Governments and other Federal Agencies

Throughout Plan revision, we actively engaged State and Federal agencies as well with all nine municipalities on the region to assess compatibility of the Revised Land Management Plan with other local land use plans and policies (per 36 CFR 219.4).

## *Municipalities of Puerto Rico and Local Government Land Use Plans and Policy*

The Forest reviewed various land use plans and policies for Puerto Rico including, the Puerto Rico Land Use Plan (PUT, 2015) by the Puerto Rico Planning Board, which is the major document that guides development in Puerto Rico. This information provided the base line for the planning process when considering land use within the Forest boundaries and at a broad, landscape level.

The Forest also considered other State / Commonwealth land use plans and policies, including the following:

- Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, Comprehensive Wildlife Resources Assessment
- Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, Forest Resources State-wide assessment
- Municipality Territorial Order Plan

- Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, Water Plan
- Municipal Land Use Plans for the region
- Puerto Rico Water Management Plan
- Protected Area Management Plans from the protected areas in the region.

The land use plans for municipalities that where considered include:

| Municipality | Applicable Land Use Plans | Applicable Land Use and Zoning Regulations |
|---|---|---|
| Canóvanas | Municipal Land Use Plan (2000)<br>PRPB Region 9 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | Municipal Land Use Regulation (2000)<br>PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Río Grande | Municipal Land Use Plan (2012)<br>PRPB Region 11 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Luquillo | No municipal land use plan<br>Zoning established through El Yunque Special Zoning Regulation (1983/1996)<br>Special Plan for the Gran Reserva Natural Special Planning Area (2011)<br>PRPB Region 11 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010)<br>Special Regulation for the Gran Reserva Natural Special Planning Area (2011) |
| Fajardo | Municipal Land Use Plan (2010)<br>PRPB Region 11 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Ceiba | No Municipal Land Use Plan<br>Zoning established through El Yunque Special Zoning Regulation (1983/1996)<br>Master Plan for the Former Roosevelt Roads Naval Base (2011)<br>PRPB Region 11 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Naguabo | No municipal land use plan<br>Zoning established through El Yunque Special Zoning Regulation (1983/1996)<br>PRPB Region 11 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Las Piedras | No municipal land use plan<br>Zoning established through El Yunque Special Zoning Regulation (1983/1996)<br>PRPB Region 10 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |
| Juncos | Municipal Land Use Plan (2007)<br>PRPB Region 10 Land Use Plan (draft 2012) | PRPB Joint Regulation (2010) |

These documents helped the planning process by:

- Providing updated guidance for managing the Forest within the context of the larger landscape and for addressing local land use changes and the associated impacts on local communities. For example, developing management strategies for partnership opportunities, and identifying collaborative efforts in support of sustainability.
- Creating a land acquisition strategy that promotes conservation initiatives for protection of surrounding hills, stream corridors, riparian areas, Wild and Scenic River corridors, and connections to the Gran Reserva del Noreste, Rivers Reserves.

These land use plans, as well as meetings and collaboration with the planners of these municipalities, helped foster an all-lands perspective throughout the region that spans all these municipalities and land ownerships. These collaborations and integration of plans will help better achieve conservation at a region-wide level for eastern Puerto Rico.

## *State Agencies*

Collaboration with State Agencies included face-to-face meetings with agency leaders, focus group meetings with planners and managers, presentations at agency symposiums and a protected areas congress. Further details of collaboration with State Agencies include the following:

- **Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER)**
    - Integration of their Comprehensive Wildlife Resources Assessment, as well as their Water Plan, to develop the focus to provide for healthy ecosystems on the Forest and for the incorporation of adaptive management on the Forest.
    - During the scoping phase for the proposed action, the agency supported the Plan's focus on working with surrounding communities for sustainable social-economic opportunities. They also expressed concerns regarding recreation sustainability and the incorporation of other land use plans for conservation beyond Forest boundaries. All of these comments were incorporated in the Forest Plan, especially through the all-lands focus and the goal to establish a new recreation system that takes into account the impacts of over-crowding in certain areas of the Forest.
    - Final Meeting to Brief the DNER on the Forest Plan was held on April 5, 2017. The agency fully supported the preferred alternative.
- **Puerto Rico Planning Board**
    - The Forest provided information to the Puerto Rico Planning Board to ensure that their comments and suggestions were utilized in the Forest Plan.
    - Examined the PR Planning Board's policies and Land Use Plan for opportunities to work on efforts that promote connection to other protected areas surrounding the Forest and providing feedback on where the Forest Plan and the PR Land Use Plan could better align to achieve conservation throughout the region.
    - The final meeting to inform the entire Board on the Forest Plan was held on April 3, 2017 after PR Government administration change. The Board fully supported the selected alternative.
- **State Historic and Preservation Office (SHPO)**
    - The Forest provided information to the Puerto Rico SHPO to ensure their comments and suggestions were incorporated on the Forest planning process and gave a presentation to SHPO about the Heritage Program and new Plan proposals.
    - The Forest extended a formal invitation to SHPO to take part in the review process of the Draft Plan and Draft EIS. The Forest received a comment letter for the Forest Plan Revision with minimal adjustments to make on the Plan along with support for the selected alternative and of the section regarding heritage on the Forest Plan.
    - Ongoing collaborative efforts continue to protect heritage resources within the Forest boundaries.

- **Puerto Rico Tourism Company (PRTC)**
    - The PRTC participated in different workshops and activities during the planning process.
    - The PRTC was fully supportive of the Forest taking into consideration the impacts it has in the socio-economic conditions of the region and its new focus to support local economies around the region and the formation of new partnerships with government, NGO's and community organizations.
    - The agency supported the selected alternative along with some recommendations for further collaboration opportunities in shared physical spaces on the Forest.
    - Members of the PRTC continue to provide support in the planning process and for future implementation through the Citizen's Committee and other means.
- **Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA)**
    - The PREPA provided comments throughout the planning process, expressing recommendations such as the creation of NGO's that can acquire lands that protect and/or rehabilitate river basins and the obtainment of funds to buy land or compensate land owners around the Forest or along river corridors in order to mitigate the impacts of development projects around the region. The Forest integrated these recommendations -to the extent of the USFS's authority- by establishing in the Plan the need and pursuit of new opportunities for land acquisition and conservation across Forest boundaries at the sub-regional level by working with adjacent and interested public and private land managers, landowners, and other stakeholders.

## *Federal Agencies*

- **United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)**
    - The Forest cooperated with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in the identification and evaluation of the Revised Plan's effects on threatened and endangered species.
    - The Forest also engaged with the USFWS in informal consultation on the Forest's "may affect, but not likely to adversely affect" determination and in the development of Forest Plan components that contribute to species recovery (FEIS, Chapter 3, "Threatened and Endangered Species" section and 2016 Biological Assessment). See the "Endangered Species Act" section in the "Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations" portion of this decision.
    - A letter of concurrence from the USFWS on the Forest's Biological Assessment (BA) was received on September 1, 2017. Following Hurricane María, a second letter from the USFWS was received on July 31, 2018, confirming that the original concurrence from September 2017 was still valid.

Other Federal agencies provided input, like the United States Department of the Interior (USDI), which suggested integrating the designation of Research Natural Area of Baño de Oro in the Forest Plan, which was done.

Upon reviewing the FEIS and planning record, I find that the coordination with other Federal agencies and State and local governments occurred as required by 36 CFR 219.4. No conflicts with the Revised Land Management Plan were identified.

### *Federally Recognized Tribes*

No federally recognized Native American Tribes exist in Puerto Rico.

## Public Involvement

Chapter 1 of the FEIS (Chapter 1, "Public Involvement" section) and Appendix A provide detailed information on the public involvement process.

Public meetings were held following the announcement that work was beginning on developing the plan assessment (which occurred in August 2012). During these public meetings, the most recent information on forest and resource conditions were shared and new information was received, a collaboration plan was designed, and an evaluation of the best available scientific information was conducted.

In January 2014, a draft of the Plan Assessment was made available to the public. Major key findings from the assessment were validated in public meetings and information and recommendations from these meetings and planning outreach activities were used to develop the preliminary need for change and a proposed action for the Revised Plan.

The notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS was published in the *Federal Register* on September 18, 2014 (79 FR, pages 56050-56054). The legal notice was also published in the two newspapers of record, *Nuevo Día* and *San Juan Daily Star* on September 14, 2014. The public was asked to comment on the proposed action by November 3, 2014.

Following the issuance of the NOI, the preliminary need for change and proposed action were shared with the public through a series of community meetings and interest group meetings to validate their content. Using the comments from local governments, other agencies, and the public, the interdisciplinary team identified two issues regarding the effects of the proposed action including the restoration of native ecological systems (issue 1) and impacts related to the rapid change of land use from forested land to an urban landscape (issue 2). To address these concerns, the Forest Service developed the alternatives described in the "Alternatives Considered in Detail" section. Also see the "Rationale" section which describes how the selected alternative responds to the (significant) issues.

A 90-day public comment period on the draft Revised Land Management Plan and associated DEIS was initiated on September 30, 2016 with the publication of the Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* (81 FR 67348). During the public comment period on El Yunque National Forest's DEIS and proposed Revised Land Management Plan, a range of concerns were raised, but were largely focused on recreation opportunities, wildlife and forest products. A total of 14 comment letters were received from the public, agencies, and public interest groups. Six individuals provided substantive comments on the Plan and DEIS. Three State government agencies and two Federal agencies provided comments. The letters received represent a total of 77 comments.

The Planning Rule Federal Advisory Committee also provided valuable input on the draft revised forest plan. This input included the use of the term "co-management" in implementing the revised forest plan, which resulted in changing the term throughout the planning documents to "shared stewardship." However, in the Spanish language versions of the plan documents, the translation of "co-management" remained.

Altogether from 2012 to 2017, approximately 62 outreach activities and meetings were hosted (see planning record or Appendix A of the EIS). Planning outreach activities included meetings with different communities and the public in general in locations that were accessible to the different municipalities located to the north, east and southwest of the Forest. Meetings were held with stakeholders including

recreation outfitters, protected area land managers, municipality planners, and the scientific and academic community.

After Hurricane Maria, further public engagement efforts were conducted through meetings held with the citizen collaboration group, in which information gathered on current condition was shared. The forest evaluated how the draft of the Revised Plan would be applied for recovery in the future.

The Notice of Availability of the Final EIS and Revised Land Management Plan was published in the *Federal Register* on August 24, 2018 (83 FR 42892) and the Notice of Opportunity to Object was also published in the *Federal Register* on August 24, 2018 (83 FR, pages 42862-42863). During the 60-day objection period for the revised forest plan, an objection was received regarding feral dogs and cats found at El Yunque National Forest. A resolution meeting with the objector was held on February 26, 2019.

## The Nature of this Decision

The purpose of this Revised Land Management Plan is to guide future projects, practices, uses and protection measures to assure sustainable multiple-use management on El Yunque National Forest over the next 15 years. Revised Plan components include desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines at three overlapping scales; along with the suitability determination of National Forest System lands for timber production and for various other uses. The three different scales where Plan components are to be applied include; forest-wide Plan components, nine management areas, and three contiguous geographic areas (see Revised Plan, Chapters 1 and 2).

The Revised Land Management Plan does not authorize projects or activities or commit the Forest Service to take action. Management direction will be implemented through site-specific activities that must be consistent with the Revised Plan (36 CFR 219.15).

Throughout the rationale section the term “we” refers to me/myself (the Forest Supervisor for El Yunque National Forest, who is the responsible official for this decision), my staff, the planning team, the Southern Regional Office, colleagues and staff from the International Institute of Tropical Forestry (IITF), partners from other government agencies, and stakeholders who worked collaboratively on this revision effort.

**Figure 1. El Yunque National Forest and surrounding areas**

# Decision and Rationale for the Decision

## Decision

I have reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the FEIS, the planning record, comments from our local government partners, other agencies, and the public and then considered how the Revised Plan meets the identified areas that need to change while meeting the requirements of 36 CFR 219, the 2012 Planning Rule. Based on this review, I have selected Alternative 2 as described in the FEIS and the accompanying El Yunque National Forest Revised Land Management Plan. By this decision, I approve the following:

- The forest-wide desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines and goals, which meet the social, economic, and ecological sustainability requirements of 36 CFR 219, the 2012 Planning Rule.
- The Plan components, including goals that apply to Management Areas and Geographic areas, and the special and designated areas.
- The identification of suitable and non-suitable uses of the Forest, including approximately 21,036 acres of land not suitable for timber production. The Forest Projected Wood Sale Quantity is currently 23.0 MCF per year. While the Sustained Yield Limit for the Forest is 591.6 MCF per year.
- Plan components for maintaining the wilderness character of the existing wilderness areas on the Forest.
- Plan components to protect the outstanding remarkable values of the designated and eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers on the Forest.
- Recommendation for expansion of the size of the Baño de Oro Research Natural Area from 2,172 to 6,441 acres.
- The identification of one watershed as a priority for restoration, Río Blanco.
- The establishment of a riparian management zone.
- The monitoring program for the Revised Plan.

## Rationale

The Forest Plan identifies the vision to maintain a healthy, accessible, and sustainable forest that integrates multiple uses; provides economic, ecological, and social opportunities; promotes education, environmental justice, cultural and environmental identity and awareness for the conservation of its natural resources; and adaptive forest management that is inclusive and collaborative. The Forest will implement this vision by developing sustainable, collaborative projects and by using the best available scientific information within the Forest as well as supporting other projects beyond forest boundaries in the region.

El Yunque National Forest has unique roles and contributions that were addressed and broadened within my selected alternative (Alternative 2). The Forest contributes socially and economically to the region, through employment expenditures, tourism and recreation opportunities among others; the Plan seeks to further enhance this contribution through the shared stewardship with its surrounding communities. These roles are essential and therefore became part of the Revised Plan's drivers to manage National Forest System lands. When considering that the forest produces 20 percent of the island's water, this alternative seeks to improve water quality and accessibility of water flow production through watershed management. It provides researchers a place to advance knowledge and sustain forest benefits.

Alternative 2 emphasizes rural economic development and a regional management perspective through the establishment of Geographic Areas, which provide support for cross-boundary work with surrounding landowners and communities, as well as with State, Federal, and other government agencies. The Forest contributes to human health and well-being, offering unique opportunities for recreation, relaxation, exercise, solitude, stewardship, spirituality, community, and many other socioeconomic and cultural benefits. It is also considered locally as a way for the people of the Island to connect to each other and shared histories through collaboration. Another unique characteristic is the Forest's dual designation as the Luquillo Experimental Forest and El Yunque National Forest. Under this alternative, the Forest will continue to improve management of this unique tropical ecosystem through expanded research and information development that can inform decision making, in addition to maintaining abundant biodiversity and habitat management for species that only exist within this forest.

With respect to the other alternatives that were considered in detail, Alternative 1 does not respond to all the significant issues (see FEIS Chapter 2 section on Alternative Development). However, it does maximize outputs of recreational opportunities, and provides for water, timber products and research within the Forest. Alternative 3 responds to recreational sustainability by reducing recreational opportunity within the National Forest lands, like a reduced trail system, while promoting recreational opportunities off National Forest lands. Alternative 3 also promotes species management on T&E Habitats and invasive species and provides a stronger response to climate change. While Alternative 3 addresses these issues, they are not favorable to the social and economic sustainability of the region (for example, the reduction of recreation opportunities and elimination of the scenic byway) and it would strain the agency's ability to meet the increased levels of management.

I ultimately decided to choose Alternative 2 as the Revised Plan because it:

- Is broadly supported by our State and local government partners, other Federal agencies, non-government organizations, and the public.
- Has been developed through a collaborative effort with State and local governments, our publics, partners, Natural Reserve Land Managers, researchers, Citizens Committee for Public Participation along with other NGO's and public and private entities including the International Institute of Tropical Forestry of the Forest Service.
- Differing from other alternatives, Alternative 2 is responsive to public input to maintain currently undesignated lands as available for sustainable use and does not recommend additional designation of Wilderness or Wild and Scenic Rivers. The Forest has more than a third of its lands designated as such.
- Promotes an "all lands approach" which encourages working with local governments to achieve common goals and maximize resources on a regional level.
- Recognizes the importance of its surrounding communities and stakeholders as well as the opportunities to improve the quality of life for people living within the area adjacent to the National Forest.
- Connects the Forest to its adjacent municipalities and communities by establishing geographic areas that are compatible with important uses in the region. For example, the geographic area "El Norte" (North) seeks to improve recreation opportunities as well as disperse recreation to other protected areas. This will also assist the conservation efforts in a regional perspective through environmental education and other such actions.
- Balances the Forest's most important ecosystem services: water resources, recreation and research.

- Creates the Community Interface Resource Management Area (CIRMA), which will be the main area for collaborative management, and is where sustainable forest practices could be considered with a community-based shared stewardship approach, connecting the Forest to the communities in a way that develops educational, recreational, and other opportunities.
- Promotes existing and new economic opportunities tied to the Forest, particularly through the promotion of sustainable uses in the CIRMA and nearby communities.
- Promotes working with private land owners to consider conservation initiatives that could benefit both them and the Forest to increase resource protection.
- Promotes assistance or education to landowners in the region surrounding El Yunque to help them understand that agricultural lands represent an opportunity for conservation, for growing food, providing for wildlife and providing employment through recreation.
- Provides for sustainable recreation by addressing the need to protect sensitive areas at higher elevations and disperse the recreational opportunity away from PR Road 191 in order to decrease crowding and improve recreational settings.
- Promotes improved resiliency through new Plan components that focus on climate change and the inherent impacts of such.
- Meets the purpose and need for the Plan revision, which was based upon the Plan Assessment and a review of the 1997 Forest Plan.
- Creates a Scenic By-Way Management Area, which responds to local government and community initiatives and fosters social and economic development in the geographic area.
- Meets the substantive requirements of the 2012 planning regulations (36 CFR Part 219).
- Has been developed based upon the best available scientific information.

In conclusion, I have selected Alternative 2 because it is the alternative supported by State and local governments, our partners, and the public, while consistently meeting requirements for social, economic and ecologically sustainable forest management practices.

## Management Themes of the Revised Plan

The assessment, as well as recommendations and comments from State and local governments, partners, other agencies, and the public, were used to identify five management themes to guide the development of the Revised Plan. The following provides a description of these management themes, along with how the Revised Plan addresses each theme:

1. Define a new recreation, access, and tourism system.

The Forest provides recreation opportunities that are in harmony and sustainable within the natural setting, where people enjoy and value its unique tropical ecosystem which includes protecting and maintaining historical and cultural recreation resources. Future demands and limited agency resources will require public support and new partnerships to improve recreation facilities and services on the Forest as well as the capacity to support recreation usage without causing damage to the environment. Currently, the Forest contributes more than $3 million per year in wildlife viewing activities. El Yunque directly contributes over $3.5 million annually to local economies through employment, expenditures, and payments from revenue sharing and in-lieu of taxes.

The Forest considered Plan components in terms of access to information, recreation, facilities and education opportunities as a broad and consistent theme throughout its development. Through various

strategies the Forest developed Plan components that facilitate improving recreation opportunities considering fiscal limitations, through Plan language such as:

> Desired condition: "*Alleviate high visitation use of PR Route 191 by increasing recreational opportunity in the lower elevations of the Forest. Lower parts of the Forest may provide more recreational opportunities and settings." "Have a regional integrated approach to recreation use and access."* ("Region" here is referring to the 9 municipalities surrounding El Yunque National Forest, it is connected to collaboration efforts beyond Forest lands or the broader landscape).
>
> Objectives: "*Identify areas in the community interface resource management area (CIRMA) that can be considered for collaborative recreation projects in at least three municipalities in the first 5 years of the Plan." "Increase the recreational opportunities by at least 25 percent with the collaboration or participation of community groups in the region through the Plan period."*

2. Promote a stronger regional identity in and around the Forest using an "all-lands" policy.

An area of community interface (CIRMA) for sustainable management of resources at the lower elevations of the Forest is in accessible locations suitable for multiple uses and provides for forest products that support local communities.

Through Plan components the Forest increases social and economic opportunities from a broader landscape perspective when developing initiatives of adjacent communities in the geographic area such as:

> Desired Conditions: *"Community-based use of the Forest focuses on environmental education and community-based enterprises in the western and southern municipalities of Canóvanas, Juncos, Las Piedras, Naguabo and Humacao."*
>
> *"The Forest's regional identity developed through the CIRMA management strategies facilitates the adaptive management initiatives with the participation of community groups that strengthen the monitoring plans at the regional level."*
>
> *"The communities and regional organizations are integrated in the recreation and tourism opportunities."*

3. Increase regional environmental literacy and provide educational opportunities for local communities.

Assist in developing community capacity for participation in various management activities in areas such as economic development, recreation, interpretation, education, conservation, restoration, research and monitoring. Identify and overcome barriers that inhibit these populations from connecting socially, culturally and economically to the natural landscapes within and surrounding the Forest.

Through collaboration and forest management, environmental literacy was considered in developing opportunities to enhance conservation education and other educational opportunities; through Plan language such as:

> Desired conditions: *"The Forest has comprehensive and complementary interpretive and educational programs that are relevant to local populations and support the conservation of the Forest, promote ecological and socioeconomic sustainability, increase interest in collaborative resource management, and address the learning needs of a diverse audience."*
>
> *"Partnerships are created with local communities, schools, special interest groups, and government agencies to develop and support interpretive and educational efforts and to strengthen regional identity and capacity for shared stewardship."*

> *"Interpretive and educational efforts and materials contribute to increasing environmental literacy, especially among youth and underserved populations, through the development of environmental thinking, decision-making, and ethical commitment. Programs are interdisciplinary, collaborative, problem-based, and promote research and action in favor of the environment."*

4. Provide for healthy ecosystems.

Protect and conserve the functional wetlands, mature forest, secondary forests and riparian areas, and maintain and improve watershed conditions on the Forest while monitoring, adapting and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Through Forest Plan components, the management actions will be guided to ensure protection and conservation of ecosystems, through components such as:

> Desired Conditions: *"Functional wetlands remain forested, predominantly with native species. The biodiversity and ecosystem processes are maintained. Viable populations of native plants are maintained or achieved."*
>
> *"Maintain healthy watershed conditions within the Forest considering water quality, water quantity, soil productivity, and vegetation. Healthy watersheds support important ecological and social services such as productive soils, biological diversity, wildlife habitats, water supplies, and flood control benefits."*
>
> *"Structure, composition and function of mature forests is maintained within the range of natural variation."*
>
> *"Maintain the functional wetland and associated vegetation types." "Maintain healthy watersheds."*
>
> Guideline*: "Design and execute wildlife habitat improvement or watershed restoration plans for endemic wildlife or fisheries species to rehabilitate areas affected by any significant natural occurrence (such as, hurricane, tropical storm, massive rain event, landslides)."*

5. Incorporate collaborative adaptive management at the plan and site-specific levels.

Continue current regional collaboration efforts engaged in conservation, management, and land use in a sustainable manner while seeking out opportunities for further partnership efforts. Shift priorities from a primarily Forest Service-driven management focus to a more collaborative management. Partnership opportunities and collaborations with local groups and organizations support the achievement of desired conditions and objectives of the Plan.

Facilitate and coordinate a framework similar to the concept of a State Technical Committee by integrating municipal and State agencies and concerned citizens within the region to request support or funds for programs and promote outreach for incentive programs available for private land-owners in the areas adjacent to the Forest.

Develop initiatives with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, academic institutions, and citizen science groups for various projects.

To ensure partnerships, collaboration, conservation and research, the Forest developed Plan components such as:

> Desired Condition: *"Lands dedicated to farming and providing natural environment in the region surrounding El Yunque will increase. Agricultural lands represent an opportunity for*

*conservation, for growing food, providing for wildlife and providing employment through recreation."*

Objectives: *"Work with existing land owners and organizations to provide incentives or acquire lands that promote conservation initiatives for protecting surrounding hills, stream corridors, riparian areas, wild and scenic river corridors, and connections to the Reserva Natural Corredor Ecólogico del Noreste (Northeast Ecological Corridor, Natural Reserve), Río Espiritu Santo Natural Reserve, Las Picuas Reserve, La Monserrate Public Park, Las Cabezas de San Juan Natural Reserve, Seven Seas Natural Reserve, Natural Areas in Roosevelt Roads, Ceiba State Park (Bosque Estatal de Ceiba) and Humacao Natural Reserve (Refugio Natural de Vida Silvestre de Humacao) over the planning period."*

Management Strategy: *"Collaborate with the International Institute of Tropical Forestry, State and Private Forestry, external partners and surrounding land managers to coordinate management and monitoring efforts related to visitor use, ecological connectivity and flows, and invasive species."*

# Meeting Substantive Requirements of the Rule

The Revised Plan has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. The Revised Plan meets the specific Rule requirements in 219.8-219.11 as follows.

## *219.8 Sustainability*

### The Revised Management Plan provides for ecological sustainability by:

- Providing for ecological integrity by having the desired conditions, objectives, standards and guidelines to restore and maintain the aquatic and forested wetland ecosystems of El Yunque National Forest (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1 and 3.1.3, Ecological Sustainability, Wetlands).
- Providing detailed desired conditions for the composition, structure, function and connectivity of each ecological system groupings that have been identified and mapped, and descriptions of system drivers, ecological processes and stressors and threats (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1, Ecological Sustainability, Diversity of Plants and Animal Communities).
- Providing a suitable habitat for at-risk species within an "all lands" landscape approach for ecosystem sustainability (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1, 3.1.2 and 3.1.10, 3.1.11, Ecological Sustainability and Species Diversity).
- Including Plan components that allow management to adjust to influences outside the borders of El Yunque National Forest, including rapid urban development (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, and Section 3.1).
- Having standards and guidelines to protect air, soil, and water quality (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).
- Having standards and guidelines for riparian management (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).

### The Revised Plan contributes to social sustainability by:

- Developing the CIRMA (Community Interface Resource Management Area), where the Forest advances recreation opportunities and the resulting socio-economic development; as well as small forest products that could contribute to socio-economic initiatives in the region.

- Creating or enhancing strong connections and relationships with the communities adjacent to the forest through the forest planning process; initiating the opportunities for collaborative work and making such coordination feasible throughout the implementation and duration of this alternative.
- Developing collaborative strategies to improve public access by, for example, dispersing recreation to lower elevations where more opportunities for recreation exist and could happen through a shared stewardship approach with surrounding communities.
- Developing collaborative strategies for environmental education, rural economic development, monitoring and restoration through projects like a Citizen Science Program.
- Establishing Plan components to foster environmental justice for the communities surrounding the Forest, through environmental education, technical assistance, and other Forest initiatives.
- Providing goals and desired conditions for each of the management areas, which describe the multiple uses opportunities of El Yunque National Forest's recreational settings (including access, recreational opportunities and scenery), contributing to local and regional economies (Revised Plan, Chapter 2).
- Providing desired conditions, goals and objectives to enhance or maintain ecosystem services provided by El Yunque, such as clean water for the region (Revised Plan, Chapter 2 and 3).
- Establishing objectives for nominating historic properties along with standards and guidelines for the protection of cultural and historic resources (Revised Plan, Chapters 3).

## *219.9 Diversity of Plant and Animal communities*

By meeting the requirements for providing ecological integrity per 219.8 (above), the Revised Plan meets the coarse filter requirements for diversity of plants and animals in 219.9(a). The Revised Plan also:

- Identifies key characteristics of ecosystems, such as primary forest or mature forest, and other key features of ecosystem composition, structure, ecological processes, connectivity, as well as stressors and threats (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1 and 3.1.2, Ecological Sustainability, Terrestrial Ecosystems: Vegetation).
- Identifies management needed for 13 threatened and endangered species (5 animal and 8 plant species) and 62 species of conservation concern (SCC) (23 animal and 39 plant species) through Plan components (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).
- Provides Plan components for specific species whose needs may not be met by ecosystem level Plan components, such as Management Situations for the Elfin-woods Warbler (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1.10).

The Revised Plan uses the tiered approach identified in the 2012 planning rule to conserve and maintain species diversity, which first involves an analysis of the ecosystems on the Forest and the species whose habitats are dependent on those ecosystems. The Plan components for conserving, restoring, or maintaining these ecosystems are often referred to as the "coarse filter" approach, which is then followed, where needed, by the "fine filter" species-specific approach (which includes the protection of sensitive habitats, such as high-elevation wetlands and the mature elfin woodland montane rain and wet cloud forests). I find the Revised Plan has the appropriate components to restore and maintain the diversity of ecosystems. Key habitat characteristics for all forest type groupings were taken into account when the desired conditions, objectives, standards and guidelines were developed. Ecological conditions for "at-risk" plant species are provided through Plan components that will protect their different habitats throughout El Yunque National Forest. Plan components for specific "at-risk" bird species are provided.

For the 13 threatened or endangered species on the Forest (FEIS, Appendix E) the Revised Plan includes components that are designed to contribute to their recovery. While future restoration projects and activities may affect individual members of a species, the long-term outcomes of restoration will provide conditions to improve recovery of these species. The Revised Plan includes standards and guidelines that will result in reduced effects to individual members of species from future projects and activities. For example, several standards address specific habitat needs for the Puerto Rican parrot, Puerto Rican sharp-shinned and broad-winged hawks, such as conducting no adverse management activities within 492 feet (150 meters) from an active nest (Revised Plan, Chapter 3, Section 3.1.10). In 2015, El Yunque staff met with U.S. Fish and Wildlife experts to review the most updated process of reaching the finalized list of threatened and endangered species that would be addressed through Forest Plan direction.

The Southern Region Regional Forester identified 62 species of conservation concern (SCC) on El Yunque National Forest. SCC are species that are known to occur in the Plan area and for which there are substantial concerns for the persistence of the species. Several data sources, including a comprehensive list of rare or sensitive plant and animal species was compiled, by the Interdisciplinary Team, combining species lists from a variety of sources, including: State species of concern obtained from the Puerto Rico's version of a Natural Heritage Program, the State Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, and the Regional Forester's list of sensitive species provided the best available scientific information to identify these species. Once SCCs were identified, we organized the species according to their habitat needs to determine how the Plan would provide and sustain ecological conditions for them. Most SCC habitat needs are met through the coarse filter approach, that is, by the desired conditions and objectives for each of the forest type's groupings. For some species groups with specific habitat needs, such as the Elfin-woods warbler and the Puerto Rican parrot, the Revised Plan has specific desired conditions and objectives to meet their needs. I find the Revised Plan components will provide ecological conditions to maintain viable populations for SCC and contribute to the recovery of threatened and endangered species.

## *219.10 Multiple Uses*

The Revised Management Plan provides for integrated resource management for multiple uses (219.10(a)) by dividing the landscape into three geographic areas. These areas have unique characteristics that facilitate a geographical approach to providing and managing multiple uses.

Appropriate plan components for multiple uses for El Yunque National Forest are described in the three geographic areas, forest-wide direction, and Management Area direction, and includes:

- Desired conditions to provide for the multiple uses and ecosystem services available in each management area considering those that are available within the Forest.
- Plan Components to supply small forest products in a sustainable manner, which support local economies and local communities (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).
- Desired Conditions, Goals, Objectives, Standards and Guidelines to provide clean water, ensure water quantity as well as improve watershed conditions where needed. This supports important ecological and social services such as productive soils, biological diversity, wildlife habitat, water supplies, and flood control benefits (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).
- Desired Conditions, Goals, Objectives, Standards and Guidelines and Management Strategies were developed to ensure economically, socially and ecologically sustainable recreation opportunities along with collaborators when appropriate. Recreation opportunities considered tourism, capacity, and opportunities to disperse recreation users to other areas, access, and changes in local demographics.
- Desired conditions, goals, standards, guidelines, objectives and management strategies developed to reduce the backlog of accrued facility deferred maintenance, particularly those items associated with

health and safety as well as facilities that could potentially provide opportunities for reuse; and to assist with collaborative efforts to improve access, roads and facilities management (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).

- Desired conditions, goals, objectives and management strategies to link trails in El Yunque National Forest ("El Norte" Geographic Area) to adjacent natural reserves in the eastern region of Puerto Rico including the Corredor Ecológico del Noreste Trails (Revised Plan, Chapter 2).
- Desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, goals, and management strategies ensuring wildlife habitat management is cooperatively managed along with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, to enhance habitat for wildlife viewing, restoration and conservation (Revised Plan, Chapter 3).
- Desired conditions, standards, and management strategies that maintain the natural scenic character of the Forest to meet the needs of the surrounding communities. This ensures that the Forest continues to provide this scenic value unique to Puerto Rico and to provide collaborative opportunities.
- Desired conditions for scenery management and scenic integrity objectives at a forest-wide level.
- Desired conditions, objectives, goals and management strategies for land conservation, restoration and acquisition considering a broader landscape perspective. These Plan components prioritize land acquisition along river corridors and riparian areas, encourages agricultural activities on lands surrounding the Forest that benefit wildlife, provides food and employment, while minimizing impacts stemming from excessive development and explores opportunities for continued land ownership adjustments (Revised Plan, Chapter 2 and 3).
- Plan Components to maintain the wilderness character (ecological characteristics) of El Toro Wilderness Area, including the development of a detailed wilderness plan (Revised Plan, Chapter 2).
- Plan Components to protect the outstandingly remarkable values of existing wild and scenic rivers as well as three rivers eligible for such designation (Revised Plan, Chapter 2 and 4).
- Plan Components that provide the public with learning and engagement opportunities of cultural resources and historic properties where appropriate and possible; as well as provide for maintenance, conservation and protection of important cultural resources and historical assets.

## *219.11 Timber Requirements based on the NFMA*

The Revised Management Plan meets the timber requirements in the Rule by:

- Identifying 7,180 acres of land as suitable for timber production. The purpose of timber production activities considered in this plan will be to restore native forests by silvicultural prescriptions that remove invasive species and provide wood products for local artisans.
- Identifying 21,036 acres of land as not suited for timber production (Revised Plan, Appendix B, Forest Products).
- Specifying that timber production is not the primary objective in the Revised Plan, but complements the desired conditions and objectives for ecosystem maintenance and restoration (Revised Plan).
- Identifying that the Projected Timber Sale Quantity that may be sold from El Yunque National Forest is 23.0 MCF per year. The Plan also states that sales cannot exceed the Sustained Yield Limit of 591.6 MCF per year (Revised Plan, Appendix B, Forest Products).
- Including standards and guidelines for limits on timber suitable for harvest as well as limitations on uses or forms of extraction (Revised Plan, Chapter 2 and Appendix B).

# Alternative Development

Alternatives were developed around those issues that involved unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources. The significant issues identified were:

- What is the best approach to provide sustainable recreation opportunities that minimize impacts to the forest while meeting current and future needs and demands of users and surrounding communities?
- What is the best approach to respond to the potential effects of a climate change on Forest resources and ecosystem services?
- How, where, and to what extent can the Forest provide opportunities that contribute to and enhance social and economic conditions in the region?

The Final EIS (FEIS), Chapter 2, "Alternatives" section has detailed information on how the action alternatives were developed. In addition to addressing these significant issues that were raised, the factors described in the Key Plan Revision Topics section of this ROD were also considered in the development of alternatives 2 and 3.

## Alternatives Considered in Detail

The no action and two action alternatives are summarized as follows. A more detailed description of these alternatives can be found in the FEIS in Chapter 2, "Alternatives" section.

### *Alternative 1 – No Action (1997 Forest Plan)*

Under Alternative 1, the 1997 Forest Plan would continue to guide management of the Plan area. The 1997 Forest Plan does not adequately address social and economic sustainability, connecting people to nature or climate change.

### *Alternative 2 – Proposed Action*

Alternative 2 is the proposed action for the Revised Forest Plan. It addresses public desire to access the Forest for recreation, but recognizes carrying capacities and the need to maintain sufficient infrastructure to support visitation. It addresses climate change by shifting recreational opportunities to the lower elevations of the Forest, which are better suited for recreational use.

Alternative 2:

- Proposes a new planning system based on ecological, social, and economic sustainability.
- Promotes recreation sustainability and addresses increased demands and needs by promoting recreation at lower elevations in a setting closer to local communities.
- Introduces Plan components for environmental education, collaboration, and ecosystem services.
- Establishes three geographic areas (El Norte, El Este and El Oeste y Sur) to increase community interactions and an "all-lands" approach to planning
- Establishes nine management areas including a new scenic byway corridor for PR 186.
- Establishes a community interface resource management area (CIRMA) to provide opportunities for forest product utilization that can be coordinated with community groups and local residents.
- Provides additional management direction for priority watersheds using the national watershed condition framework.

- Recommends increasing the size of Baño de Oro Research Natural Area from 2,172 to 6,441 acres.
- Recognizes the need to protect and restore the wetlands that occur over 600 meters in elevation and increases the recognized forest vegetation types from 4 to 15 to reflect the new vegetation classification system and the Forest's most recent findings.
- Removes direction for managing species as management indicator species and replace it with species of conservation concern.
- Establishes the initiative to reuse historical structures.

Alternative 2 retains existing Forest Plan direction (including standards and guidelines) for research on wilderness and wild and scenic rivers on the Forest.

### *Alternative 3*

Alternative 3 was developed to respond to concerns wanting an increased focus on ecological sustainability. It would reduce the number of maintained trail miles. This alternative would expand wilderness, and would not create a scenic byway management area. This alternative is similar to Alternative 2, with the following changes:

- Recommends designation of the Baño de Oro Research Natural Area as wilderness.
- Provides additional Plan components to address invasive species management in areas of road rights-of-way, recreation areas, and threatened and endangered habitats in order to manage invasive species and restore landscape-level conditions.
- Addresses some sustainable recreation concerns by reducing the trail system to a level that can be maintained.
- Creates two geographic areas, North and South, to connect with communities on both sides of the Forest.
- Excludes the scenic byway management area for PR 186, due to the amount of use this would produce on the western side of the Forest.

## Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

NEPA requires Federal agencies to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the proposed action provided suggestions for alternative methods of achieving the purpose and need. Some of these alternatives may have been outside the scope of what can be included in the revised El Yunque Forest Plan, duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail or determined to be components that would cause unnecessary environmental harm. Three alternatives were considered, but dismissed from detailed consideration for reasons summarized below.

### *Custodial (no recreation management, special uses or research management)*

This alternative was not considered in detail because it does not meet law or policy requirements to provide multiple uses. This alternative would also not comply with the dual designation of El Yunque National Forest as also the Luquillo Experimental Forest.

### *Intensify the Recovery of the Puerto Rican parrot*

This management component as a significant theme to an alternative was not considered in detail because El Yunque National Forest is suboptimal habitat for the species at this time. The interagency effort has realized that El Yunque has limited habitat capacity and limited population growth potential for a future population without management (White, 2009).

### *Recommending designation of all eligible wild and scenic rivers*

This alternative was not considered in detail for the following reasons:

- There is no public support for additional wild and scenic river designations beyond those already designated;
- Additional areas would increase management complexity; and,
- People would still like to have access to these areas.

## Changes from DEIS to FEIS

In response to comments on the DEIS and further internal reviews, the following is a summary of the primary changes made to the FEIS and the Revised Land Management Plan. Excluding minor editorial and organization changes, clarifications and typographical errors, the modifications are summarized here:

- Addressing and adding language to address invasive species management.
- Updated language for management of aquatic species management.
- A desired condition for water resources was added to address hydrologic connectivity of the rivers flowing from the forest to maintain healthy aquatic fauna.
- Improved language to address the conflicts between recreation and communication facilities.
- Updated language to clarify harvesting activities to provide for forest products within the CIRMA.
- Changed the language in the Plan from “co-management” to “shared stewardship” (in the English version) to meet agency direction.
- Updated the monitoring program to include scale, alerts and response by resource area.
- Expanded the Ecosystems desired conditions to include better descriptions of the composition, structure and function.
- Included an appendix on compatibility between local land use plans and the Revised Forest Plan.
- Included responses to comments from the comment period in Appendix A of the FEIS.
- Updated the Appendix in the FEIS on ecosystems and species diversity, and added a table showing the Plan components with each at-risk species.
- Following Hurricanes Irma and María, which passed over the Forest in September 2017, a review of the proposed plan was conducted to determine if the effects of the hurricanes would require significant changes to the Forest Plan. It was determined that no major changes were needed, although some desired conditions and goals for addressing large-scale disturbances on the Forest and adjacent areas were added, some objectives and management strategies were updated, and two standards for the Puerto Rican Parrot were added. The Forest also updated applicable information and sections in the FEIS’s Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences Chapter.

- During the 60-day objection period for the revised forest plan, one objection was received regarding stray dogs and cats found El Yunque National Forest. The objector expressed concerns that stray dogs and cats pose a health risk to the public by possibly spreading rabies and cause harm to wildlife by predation. (See the "Administrative Review" section below for more information on the objection received.)

# Environmentally Preferable Alternative

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives which were considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). Forest Service NEPA regulations define an environmentally preferable alternative as: "the alternative that best promotes the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's section 101. Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative that causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it is also the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources" (36 CFR §220.3). Within Alternative 2, all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from this alternative have been adopted. Through the selected alternative's desired conditions, standards, guidelines, goals and management strategies, environmental harm is minimized. Through the monitoring plan within the Revised Forest Plan the effects of minimizing impacts will be reviewed periodically as required by the 2012 Forest Planning Rule.

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding National Forest System management, that Alternative 2 is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to Alternatives 1 and 3, it best contributes and moves the Forest towards, ecological, social and economic sustainability which will benefit future generations (see "Rationale" and "Meeting Substantive Requirements of the Rule" sections). The planning record for El Yunque National Forest Revised Plan contains further documentation on how Section 101 of NEPA was considered and evaluated.

# Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the Plan decision, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered.

## Ecosystems

The desired conditions for ecosystems were developed using information provided by the Forest Assessment that includes information from scientific journals and books, information from the International Institute of Tropical Forestry (The Institute) and databases such as TESP/IS, Wildlife, WIT, AqS, among others. The information assessed provides characteristics of the composition, structure and the ecological processes needed to sustain the ecosystems and these were obtained using the Best Available Scientific Information. This information guided the determination of key characteristics of each ecosystem.

## Vegetation

The revised vegetation classification for El Yunque National Forest (EYNF) was developed by The Institute's Remote Sensing Laboratory with input from their researchers and El Yunque National Forest specialists. The geospatial data was based on the PR Gap 2000 land cover map (Gould et al. 2007) and

modified to better fit the Forest's management needs. To do this, the Holdridge ecological life zones (Ewel and Whitmore 1973), the 600 m elevation line where cloud formation begins (USGS), a 3,300 mm precipitation line (Daly et al. 2003) and a 100 feet buffer around the rivers (National Hydrography Dataset) inside the forest to identify riparian forest were incorporated to create the new vegetation classification.

## Aquatic – Rivers, Streams and Wetlands

Desired conditions and objectives for rivers, streams and the forest's wetlands were informed using characteristics in the Watershed Condition Framework (USDA Forest Service, 2011a) and the scientific information used to develop the Framework. Relevant information was also provided by The Institute, which has been actively conducting research at El Yunque National Forest. Monitoring questions and indicators were developed using the characteristics of the Watershed Condition Framework that will determine and disclose conditions of the watersheds on El Yunque National Forest. The effectiveness of the best management practices will be monitored and reported every 2 years.

## Threatened and Endangered Species

Five federally listed threatened or endangered fauna species and eight federally listed threatened or endangered flora species were identified as known to occur on El Yunque National Forest through informal consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Twenty-three fauna species of conservation concern and thirty-nine plant species of conservation concern were identified as known to occur on the Forest using a variety of sources.

## At-Risk Species

The "at-risk" species habitat needs were associated with the key characteristics of the ecosystems using the most reliable approach as documented in The Nature Conservancy's "Conservation Action Planning Handbook" (The Nature Conservancy 2006). The Forest Service Southern Region has developed a digital data system (called the Ecological Sustainability Evaluation Tool or ESE Tool) for species conservation planning based on The Nature Conservancy's procedures. The evaluation of species groups with ecosystems informed the development of desired conditions, objectives and standards and guidelines to provide ecological conditions for the persistence of these species groups.

Monitoring questions and indicators were developed for focal species in order to determine how well the ecosystem conditions are functioning and which will provide data and whether adaptive strategies are needed for "at-risk" species (Chapter 4, Revised Forest Plan).

Conditions for "at-risk" species and rare communities, including the effects of natural disturbances, were estimated using the professional judgement of the IITF and El Yunque National Forest biologists and ecologists, and were informed by research literature that is referenced in the Plan Assessment and FEIS.

## Changing Climate

The most reliable and relevant information about a changing climate was provided by the Southern Research Station, Eastern Forest Environmental Threat Assessment Center. Scientific information considered during the Plan Assessment was based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of peer reviewed literature and modeling results available through the "Template for Assessing Climate Change Impacts and Management Options" (TACCIMO; Treasure et al. 2014). The comprehensive literature review focused on addressing all ecosystems described in the Plan's ecological framework as a coarse filter and species of interest as a fine filter. The literature review also addressed climate effects on other required assessment topics related to social, cultural, and economic sustainability. Modeling results

considered in the assessment included climate projections from a broad array of current climate models, sea level rise modeling, tree species distribution modeling, water supply stress modeling, and climate resiliency modeling. The literature review and synthesis was compiled in a peer reviewed General Technical Report that received comments from leading scientific experts (Jennings et al. 2014). Desired conditions and objectives were informed by potential stressors and threats influenced by climate variability and change, particularly sea level rise and disturbance drivers. Climate change monitoring questions and indicators are linked to the Southern Region's Broad Scale Monitoring Strategy that will track changing conditions, including sea level rise, caused by climate change and includes explicit consideration of scientific accuracy, relevance and reliability.

## Ecosystems Services

A national classification system for ecosystem services developed by the Environmental Protection Agency was used to classify final environmental goods and services and determine the beneficiaries of the services. While the science of ecosystem services is rapidly developing, this approach was most relevant within the timeframe of Revised Plan development.

## Economic and Social Environment

The Forest has been a place of profound ecological, social, economic, historical, and cultural importance, and associated with it a wide range of benefits and services for local communities and society at large. These municipalities and the communities have longstanding social and economic ties to the Forest and the goods and services that it protects and provides. Population dynamics, human health and well-being, economic diversity, and other socioeconomic factors from sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Commerce, and the Puerto Rico Planning Board were evaluated to determine the Socioeconomic environment of the geographical region.

## Recreation

Desired conditions and objectives for recreational settings, recreation opportunities and sustainable recreation were informed by using characteristics in the Forest Service ROS Users Guide (USDA Forest Service 1986) as well as sustainable recreation principles. Information from national visitor use monitoring (NVUM) and national strategies such as "A Framework for Sustainable Recreation" were used including the scientific strategies used to develop these strategies and frameworks. Conditions related to recreation will be monitored every two to five years, depending on what level and what type of recreation management activities will be addressed.

## Scenic Character

Desired conditions, standards, guidelines and management strategies for scenic character were informed by "Landscape Aesthetics, a Handbook for Scenery Management" (USDA Forest Service 1995), input from the public on scenery value and other agency information. Monitoring questions and indicators were developed using the characteristics of scenic character as well scenic integrity on El Yunque National Forest. Monitoring of scenery will be addressed through a broader-landscape collaborative approach.

## Conclusion

I find that the best available scientific information was used to develop the Revised Plan components and other Plan content. There are no known controversies over the science of the ecology of ecosystems. Throughout the plan revision process, literature that was submitted by the public or other Agencies was

used to improve the analysis. No literature that could be considered "opposing" was submitted as part of comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

# Research Station Director Concurrence

The Luquillo Experimental Forest (LEF) is a dual designation of El Yunque National Forest within its boundaries. Research operations are guided by the International Institute of Tropical Forestry (The Institute), not by El Yunque. The Forest has worked with The Institute since the assessment phase of plan revision. The Revised Land Management Plan direction for the LEF recognizes that the LEF conducts studies and experiments to develop needed information and tools to manage, restore, and conserve the functions and values of the Forests. The Revised Land Management Plan identifies those areas within the LEF that will be managed based on potential ecosystem restoration needs. On July 18, 2017, the Director of the International Institute of Tropical Forestry had a meeting with the Forest to discuss the concurrence of the Revised Land Management Plan direction that is applicable to the Luquillo Experimental Forest, as required by 36 CFR 219.2(b)(4). A letter of concurrence from the Director of IITF on the Revised Forest Plan was signed on August 14, 2018.

# Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

## Clean Air Act

The FEIS (Chapter 3, "Air Quality" and "Climate Change" section) addresses and discloses potential impacts from program activities that can be subsequently proposed, evaluated and approved under the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan includes desired conditions, standards and guidelines and strategies for maintaining air quality. Except for particular circumstances, the Forest does not use prescribed fire nor does it have management practices in its Revised Plan that could adversely affect the air quality. Therefore, the management related to air quality monitoring will be more focused on climate impacts. When considering guidelines for managing forest activities, the Forest seeks to limit activities that will adversely affect air quality in collaboration with agencies that can inform this process when information is needed. Therefore, I find this decision to be in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

## Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (CWA) (33 U. S. C. § 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters. In Puerto Rico, the designated agency for enforcement of the Clean Water Act is the Environmental Quality Board of Puerto Rico. The FEIS addresses potential impacts to water resources in the Chapter 3, "Water and Watersheds" and "Aquatic Ecosystems" sections.

The Revised Land Management Plan provides components for protecting water resources and aquatic habitats. In addition, water resources and habitats will be protected by implementing the Forest Plan's riparian management direction and by following the Forest Service's National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands. The Revised Plan provides specific direction that will protect the water resources by ensuring that no management practices that may cause detrimental changes in water quality and chemical composition, or block the watercourses, or deposit sediment that adversely affects the water conditions and fish habitat, will be permitted. Therefore, I find this decision complies with the Clean Water Act.

# Endangered Species Act

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (ESA Section 7(a) (2)).

In January 2013, the Forest notified the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) of the forest plan revision process and requested lists of federally listed threatened and endangered species, species proposed for Federal listing, and candidate species to be considered for further evaluation throughout the forest plan revision process. In 2016, the Forest met with the FWS to finalize the list of threatened and endangered species that would be addressed in the Biological Assessment (BA). See the planning record for the complete consultation history.

In accordance with Section 7(c) of the Act, a BA assessed the effects of implementing El Yunque National Forest Revised Land Management Plan on thirteen federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed species or designated critical habitat known or likely to occur on El Yunque National Forest in eastern Puerto Rico.

The BA has a finding of "may affect, but not likely to adversely affect" for the federally endangered animal species: Puerto Rican parrot (*Amazona vittata)*, Puerto Rican Broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus brunnescens)*, Puerto Rican sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus venator)*, Puerto Rican Boa (*Epicratus inornatus)*, and the threatened Elfin woods warbler (*Setophaga angelae)*. A "may affect, but not likely to adversely affect" was determined for the federally endangered plant species of Capa Rosa (*Calicarpa ampla)*, Uvillo (*Eugenia haematocarpa)*, Guayabota pequeña (*Ilex obcordata (syn. sentinisii))*, *Ternstroemia subsellis, Lepanthes eltoroensis,* Chupacallos (*Pleodendrum macrantum)*, Palo de Jazmin (*Styrax portoricensis)*, Palo Colorado (*Ternstroemia luquillensis).*

The Revised Plan includes desired conditions, standards and guidelines, objectives and provides broad management direction. These Forest Plan components comply with the requirements of the ESA and the associated recovery plan for each federally listed species. The BA was submitted to FWS for review and a "letter of concurrence" from the FWS on the Forest's BA was received on September 1, 2017. A second letter of concurrence, confirming that the original concurrence from September 2017 was still valid following Hurricane María, was signed on July 31, 2018. For these reasons, I find this decision to be in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

# Executive Order 12898 - Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice populations exist within the 9-municipality planning area. El Yunque has a conglomerate of unique qualities, one of the most significant are the communities that surround it. These communities can be identified within the framework of environmental justice qualities as described in the Planning Rule (2012). The communities in the region surrounding the Forest have the lowest income per capita in the nation. Youth programs are greatly needed to give equal opportunities in land use within National Forest Systems lands and the communities that surround the Forest are mostly (all) Puerto Rican, a minority at a national level. Although some interaction with the Forest and the communities have existed in the past; historically they have not had a participative relationship with the Forest (underserved). These are precisely the traits that the new Forest Planning Rule (2012) describe as the types of populations that we should be actively engaging to encourage and enable their participation in planning processes regarding Forest management activities and use of Forest resources as part of seeking environmental justice.

El Yunque National Forest has, during all stages of the planning process, addressed youth, low income populations, minority populations, as well as underserved communities to promote and develop further accessibility to the Forest lands and Forest collaboration initiatives. At the assessment stage, the Forest developed community meetings and activities with communities that had not been engaged before. During the planning process (in the need for change, the proposed action as well as the development of the alternatives) the Forest met with these sectors of the public for their input and to establish a relationship for future engagement and collaborative opportunities within the realms of environmental education, recreation, access, tourism, conservation, etc. This became a historic opportunity for the Forest to not only address the forest-wide issues but to contribute to the broader landscape as it seeks Environmental Justice for its local communities (FEIS, Chapter 3, Environmental Justice).

## Executive Order 1190 and 11998 – Wetlands and Floodplain Management

This decision protects wetlands values and function through the implementation of the riparian management zones and by following the Forest Service's "National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands" (USDA Forest Service 2012). (See also, FEIS, Chapter 3, "Extreme Weather Events", "Water and Watersheds", "Ecological Systems", and "Threatened and Endangered Species/Species of Conservation Concern" sections). The Revised Plan has the desired condition that "the functional wetland within El Yunque National Forest is protected and preserved", and states that "Wetlands are identified and administered in accordance with appropriate management requirements related to Federal legislation and regulations that apply to Puerto Rico."

This decision protects wetlands and conserves riparian areas through the Revised Plan direction found in the "Aquatic Ecosystem" "Functional Wetland" and "Riparian Management Zones" sections. The Plan identifies that "Riparian management zones are defined as a 100-foot zone inland from each edge of a river or stream (defined as bank full), unless a site-specific analysis is conducted to identify and delineate the riparian management zone."

The Revised Plan includes the management standard that no management practices that may cause detrimental changes in water quality and chemical composition, or block the watercourses, or deposit sediment that adversely affects the water conditions and fish habitat, will be permitted within the riparian management zone. The Plan has the additional guideline to "ensure Forest Service soil and water best management practices are implemented when management or maintenance activities are conducted near riparian areas."

## National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Federal agencies are required to consider and disclose the effects of proposed actions that significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Revised Land Management Plan is a programmatic level planning effort that does not directly authorize any ground disturbing activities or projects.

I find the environmental analysis for the Revised Land Management Plan meets the requirements of NEPA, and the CEQ and Forest Service regulations. The ID Team considered public and other agency input throughout the planning process (FEIS, Chapter 1, "Public Involvement" section), developed and analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives (FEIS, Chapter 2, "Alternatives" section) and considered and displayed the environmental consequences in the EIS in conformance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), CEQ's NEPA regulations (40 CFR 1500 to 1508) and the Agency's NEPA procedures (36 CFR 220). Future ground disturbing activities and projects will be consistent with the

Revised Land Management Plan and subject to additional site-specific public involvement, environmental analysis, and pre-decisional review processes in compliance with the Act and CEQ's NEPA regulations.

## National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a final planning rule at 36 CFR 219 for National Forest System land management planning (2012 Rule) 77 FR 68 [21162-21276]. The "Rationale" section of this decision and the section on "Meeting Substantive Requirements of the Rule" document how the Revised Land Management Plan meets these 36 CFR 219 requirements.

## National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license; while Section 110 of the NHPA outlines the Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and protection of historic properties.

I find this decision is fully compliant with the Act. The Revised Land Management Plan is a programmatic level planning effort that will not directly authorize any ground disturbing activities or projects. The Revised Plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of the direction in the Revised Plan will fully comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) of Puerto Rico.

I find this decision offers the greatest potential for interpretation and education of cultural resources by having Forest Plan direction which emphasizes the creation of partnerships with the forest-surrounding communities. This effort increases knowledge about the protection of cultural resources, which could in turn reduce probability of damages. (FEIS, Chapter 3, Cultural and Historic Resources Section)

# Effective Date and Plan Implementation

The 2019 El Yunque National Forest Revised Land Management Plan will become effective 30 days after publication of the Notice of Approval in the Federal Register (§219.17(a)(1)). The revised plan's effective date is calculated on the basis of that publication in the Federal Register.

Forest plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. The Revised Plan will be implemented through a series of project-level decisions based on site-specific environmental analysis and public involvement. The Revised Plan seeks to guide management activities and projects by establishing a clear desired condition for El Yunque and for each ecosystem, rather than by establishing schedules for actions. This approach leaves more flexibility for managers to adapt program and project selection as changes take place in budgets, resource capabilities, and management priorities.

Outputs in the FEIS are not commitments but projections of possible outcomes. They were used to approximate activities and practices in order to estimate the likely environmental effects of following the direction provided by the Revised Plan.

Throughout the life of the Plan, specific projects and activities will be proposed and analyzed. These analyses will be done in accordance with NEPA, and documented in the appropriate NEPA documents, (i.e., environmental assessments or environmental impact statements, or will be categorically excluded from such documentation). Projects, practices and activities will be designed to be consistent with the applicable desired conditions, objectives and standards and guidelines in the Revised Plan.

In implementing the Revised Plan, the Forest will follow the Monitoring as identified in Chapter 4 of the Plan and a biennial monitoring evaluation report will be produced.

# Transition to the Revised Land Management Plan

The Revised Plan direction will apply to all projects for which decisions are made on or after the effective date of this ROD. Every project and activity must be consistent with the applicable Plan components. A project or activity approval document must describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable components of the Revised Plan. The criteria for determining consistency with the Revised Plan are detailed in 36 CFR 219.15(d).

The National Forest Management Act requires that when land management plans are revised, resource plans and permits, contracts and other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands shall be revised as soon as practicable to be consistent with the current Land Management Plan (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)). Any revisions of these instruments are subject to valid existing rights.

There are many management actions that have decisions made before the effective date of this ROD. These pre-existing actions were considered part of the baseline in developing the Revised Plan and the projected effects of these actions are part of the cumulative effects analyses documented in the FEIS. An additional analysis concluded that the continued implementation of these previously decided actions will not foreclose the ability to meet the desired conditions and objectives of this Revised Plan.

I have not identified the need to modify any pre-existing actions involving permits, contracts, or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands due to inconsistencies with the Revised Plan. These actions will be implemented according to the terms of the applicable instrument. However, should the need arise, I have the discretion to modify these permits, contracts or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands.

# Plan Amendments

The Revised Plan is a dynamic document that can be changed with appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. Through the life of the Revised Plan, amendments may be needed to incorporate new information, new policy and direction, or changing values and resource conditions. Amendments will keep the Revised Forest Plan current, relevant, and responsive to agency and public concerns. Amendments are needed whenever any of the Revised Plan components should be changed due to any of the above conditions. The Revised Plan also can be amended for specific projects if it is determined that the best method of meeting project goals and objectives conflicts with existing Plan direction. There will be opportunities for the public to be involved in any future changes to the Revised Plan. Any amendment to the Revised Plan will need to follow the Plan amendment process outlined in 36 CFR 219.13. In some situations, an “administrative change” can be used to update/change the Plan (see also §219.13).

Administrative changes are generally limited to changes to parts of the Plan that are not plan components, except that administrative changes also include corrections of clerical errors to any part of the Plan, and conformance of the Plan to new statutory or regulatory requirements (§219.7(f)).

# Administrative Review

This decision was subject to the pre-decisional objection process pursuant to 36 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) § Part 219 Subpart B. A 60-day objection period on the draft Record of Decision (ROD), revised forest plan, and final environmental impact statement was initiated on August 24, 2018 with the publication of the Legal Notice of the Opportunity to Object in the San Juan's *Daily Star* and El Nuevo Día newspapers. One objection was received during the objection filing period, which only had one issue. The objector brought forth concerns about the feral dogs and feral cats found in El Yunque.

On March 25, 2019, the reviewing officer for El Yunque NF (the Regional Forester) responded to the Objector. In the objection review response letter, the reviewing officer recognized the following actions the Forest has been taking to address the concerns about the feral dogs and feral cats found in El Yunque:

- The Land Management Plan has a Desired Condition (DC 4) that "Invasive species are controlled" (Section 3.1.10 "At-Risk Species – Fauna", p. 60) and identifies feral dogs and feral cats as Focal Species to be monitored for their impacts to the fauna species on the Forest and well as impacts to users of the Forest (see Table 4-1, p. 94).

- The Final EIS in Table 3-1 (p. 145) recognizes that feral dogs and feral cats are "disease vectors", present "potential aggressive human interactions", and that the management response is "live trapping for removal." The FEIS further identifies that "these species can affect niche availability and individual behavior of native and endemic species", "these species are associated with recreational areas because of the availability of food leftovers"; and that "in regard to feral dogs and cats, there will be better collaboration with municipalities to use pounds for the collection of captured individuals" (p. 146). In the FEIS it is also identified that the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources is the local agency to work with in providing animal shelters for unwanted dogs and cats instead of abandoning them on the Forest (FEIS, Appendix A, 4.3 section p. 262).

- The Forest has already been implementing a program where they remove feral dogs and cats and take them to local shelters unless they are rabid, and that they work with municipal government shelters, as well as USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) – Veterinary Services, and the State Veterinary in the control and removal of feral dogs and feral cats.

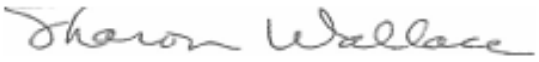
As the Responsible Official for approving and implementing the Land Management Plan for El Yunque NF, our commitment is to continue with the implementation of these ongoing management activities to help control feral dogs and cats within El Yunque NF.

# Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, contact Pedro Ríos, Forest Planner, at 787-549-0080.

# Approval

I approve the selection of Alternative 2 for the Revised Land Management Plan for El Yunque National Forest. This revised plan has been built on a strong foundation of science along with collaboration and engagement with members of the public, conservation organizations and other Federal, State, and local agencies. I look forward to continued collaboration as we implement this plan into the future.



May 20, 2019

Sharon Wallace
Forest Supervisor
El Yunque National Forest

Date